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SUBJECT: NIGER: KORANIC SCHOOLS CALL FOR HELP

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[1](#)B. 06 NIAMEY 746
[1](#)C. NIAMEY 158
[1](#)D. NIAMEY 713

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Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER ZACH HARKENRIDER FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) During recent travel across southern Niger, Poloff interacted with traditional and religious leaders and religious educators. In each instance, they were concerned by the quality and diversity of instruction they were able to offer in their madrassas. Religious leaders felt that many Nigerien madrassas lacked the resources -- though not the will -- to offer vocational, health, and life-skills instruction that would enable their graduates to be economically and socially viable members of their communities. Given madrassas' central role in Nigerien education, improving their quality is a goal of the Government of Niger (GON) and should be a goal of the USG. Going beyond education, mainstream clerics noted that the fundamentalist Izala sect could offer its parishioners more material benefits and assistance than the traditional orders could, and that this is an important factor in determining the allegiance of many Muslims in the world's least developed country. These discussions suggest that USG development interventions can (and should) help to meet a significant demand for improved madrasa education. We would thereby bolster Niger's traditional, moderate Islamic leadership and help madrasa students integrate economically and socially.
END SUMMARY

NIGERIEN ISLAM AND THE MADRASSA

[1](#)2. (C) During recent travel to the southern Nigerien population centers of Zinder, Maradi, and Birni N'Konni, Poloff interacted with a number of Imams, Islamic educators, and traditional chiefs. (In Niger the latter embody both spiritual and temporal power). Like most Nigerien Muslims,

our interlocutors were traditional Sufis, usually of the Tidjaniya or Qadiriyya brotherhoods. While conservative, these leaders practice a syncretistic version of Sunni Islam that mixes African traditions with Koranic and scriptural guidance (reftel A). While this makes their version of Islam more socially conservative in some instances, it also seems to increase tolerance for ambiguity and other approaches to faith. It therefore seems fair to describe them both as "traditional" and "moderate," as opposed to "fundamentalist," or "textualist" -- terms which suggest strict Koranic interpretation. Most of the clerics Poloff met had positive things to say about Christians and the west; most were involved in local interfaith dialogue efforts; most respected the Government of Niger (GON)'s status as a "non-confessional" (as distinct from "secular") state.

13. (C) None of that is true of Niger's small but visible Izala community. A fundamentalist school prominent in the Shari'a states of northern Nigeria, Izala receives substantial funding from Middle Eastern sources that enables the sect to punch above its weight in mosque construction, charity and social services, and proselytization. Izalists use financial largesse and their associations with Middle Eastern and Nigerian wealth to attract parishioners. Mission contacts note that many otherwise moderate Nigeriens are drawn to Izala by virtue of its perceived ability to meet their economic and material needs. While Izala's allure may be more financial than theological, the former attraction is potent in the world's least developed country. Izalists are regarded by traditional Nigerian Muslims as "troublemakers" who absent themselves from community life and African traditions, practice veiling and cloistering of women, and have little tolerance for other Muslims -- let alone members of other faiths.

14. (C) Interestingly, while moderate Muslim contacts were

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concerned with Izala's material resources, they were less concerned by its role in educating the young. Most Nigerian madrasa students still attend traditional sects' schools and it seems that Izalist leaders are currently more interested in winning adult converts than in educating the next generation. When speaking of education, Poloff's interlocutors were not concerned with competition with the Izalists (indeed there is some evidence that the two groups share concerns over Koranic education), but with their students' ability to get real jobs after graduation. Madrasa education is not a battlefield between tradition and fundamentalism, but it is perhaps a tool through which traditional sects and clergy can be strengthened. Madrasa education matters in Niger. While attendance at modern, secular, government schools is mandatory, weak enforcement of school truancy laws and a historical reluctance on the part of parents (particularly Hausas) to send their children to modern schools leaves many students entirely to the madrassas. Most Nigerian parents are comfortable with the idea of madrasa education. Attendance at madrassas tends to be enforced by familial and social pressure in a way that public school attendance is not.

WHAT MADRASSA EDUCATORS WANT...

15. (C) Poloff asked what sort of education madrasa educators would need to offer to meet their communities' needs. What, in fact, would they like to offer, if they had additional means at their disposal? Imam Mounirou Issoufou of Zinder offered some answers. Issoufou and his madrasa are representative of traditional Islamic education in Niger. His madrasa teaches Koranic recitation and memorization to 314 students, ranging in age from three to twenty. Perhaps fifteen or twenty percent of these students also attend government schools during the day, and only come to the Imam in the evenings at the behest of their families. But for most

of these students, this free madrassa is their only school. The Imam's students are mostly from working and lower-middle class families in Zinder city, though a smaller number are borders from the surrounding countryside. Yet, Nigerien parents of all classes regard this form of Islamic education as at least a necessary supplement to the liberal western education dispensed in the government schools. Most Nigeriens will therefore undertake several years of supplementary Koranic studies during their school years. Mounirou's own education was entirely at the hands of his father, a Koranic teacher of great repute in Zinder. The Imam is a Tidjaniya cleric. This brotherhood is dominant in Zinder, claiming the allegiance of the Sultan of Zinder and his court, eighty percent of the local clergy, and seven out of eleven principal mosques.

¶6. (C) Imam Mounirou's concerns were both personal and reflective of broader community anxieties. His students' futures are in question. Even those who also attend government schools are subject to an overly formal, economically irrelevant French curriculum little changed since independence. The quality of teaching in public schools is abysmal and most students pass because their parents can afford to pay for private tutoring or for outright bribes to teachers (reftels B, C). For his part, Mounirou cannot do much more for the children, but he would like to. Stressing the need for vocational rather than classical-liberal education, he ticked off a list of skills that schools like his wish to impart: health and sanitation training; and, job skills like farming, livestock raising, masonry, and tailoring. He noted that each of these trades has an association in Zinder that could partner with the madrassas to provide training. He was confident that students with those skills could find steady employment.

¶7. (C) Zinder Malam (Islamic teacher) Bachir Abba is a "modern marabout." In dress, language (French), age, and preoccupations, he cuts a very different figure from the other clergy and traditional leaders Poloff met. Yet, he offers the same advice with respect to the needs of Koranic students. A part-time Koranic teacher and construction contractor, he is also the Secretary General of the Zinder

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based "Union des Ecoles Koranique de Niger." Abba works with all sects -- even the Izalists -- on questions of Koranic education. He argued that, whatever their differences were in other areas, Izalists and traditional Muslims worked well enough together on issues of education, and had similar perspectives as to students' needs. He described three types of Nigerien religious school: modern madrassas, traditional Koranic schools, and "Lycees Franco-Arabe," or Franco-Arabic high schools. A modern madrassa has real classrooms and a broad curriculum that offers education in geography, science, religion, and philosophy etc. as well as Koranic studies. The medium of instruction is French or Arabic, though local languages like Hausa prevail at the lower grade levels. It is intended to offer after-hours instruction to public school students who seek Islamic education. However, like its traditional counterpart, the modern madrassa has many students who do not attend "mandatory" GON schools at all. Lycees Franco-Arabe are GON schools, but on a compromise model. They provide children from more conservative families with religious and Arabic language instruction in addition to French and a full modern curriculum. Traditional Koranic schools, which Abba described as "the greatest plague on Koranic schools in Zinder," are often outdoors and subject to the elements. Teachers are Imams like Issoufou, perhaps assisted by some older students or "disciples." Traditional madrassas' offerings are limited to Koranic and religious teaching and perhaps some religious philosophy. Their medium of instruction is Hausa, with limited exposure to Arabic through Koranic memorization.

¶8. (C) Abba noted that the problems facing madrassa students were identical to those facing Nigerien students in general.

Everyone needs to escape from sclerotic and economically irrelevant curricula -- whether religious or secular. Young people need job training that can offer them the prospect of post-graduate employment. Abba offered specifics similar to those of Imam Issoufou. He noted that trade associations and the GON-run "Nigertec" vocational training institutes could partner with madrassas to offer vocational training. Students should learn carpentry, modern construction techniques, tailoring, metal working, small engine repair, craft production, and how to run small businesses. Modern farming and animal husbandry techniques and animal purchase / re-sale cooperatives also made his list. When Poloff suggested civics, literacy, and health / hygiene Abba agreed enthusiastically. These are the ideas that have local support.

¶9. (SBU) The foregoing would hardly qualify as a classical liberal education, but the failure of French-derived modern education to qualify Nigeriens for the sort of jobs their economy generates is a subject of considerable frustration in the country. In a May 7 meeting with a youth NGO "Club Republicain" in Birni N'Konni, young, well educated Nigeriens complained that there were as many as 11,000 unemployed university graduates in the country. Gone are the days when a guaranteed job in the civil service or a parastatal company awaited any graduate of the national university. Not only has the quality of instruction there, as in the public schools, plummeted in the last twenty years, post-grad job prospects have taken a dive too, thanks to the GON's virtual bankruptcy during the 1990s and the austerity measures that it produced. The definition of "success" for Nigerien youth has changed to reflect this new reality. A successful role model is no longer the well educated, Francophone civil servant or teacher; it is, rather, the person who can engage in commerce or a trade and support their family. That is the position to which Issoufou's students aspire. In light of the deep problems facing public education and the economy's inability to produce "knowledge sector" jobs, such aspirations are realistic.

¶10. (C) Similar views were expressed in less detail in Poloff's meetings with other religious and traditional leaders. Zinder Alkali (Islamic judge) Sani Falalou and Imam Souley, leaders of the region's Quadiriyya community, noted the need for more modern agricultural training and technology. Maradi-based traditional Province Chief Ali Zaki stressed that students and young Nigeriens generally need professional training. He noted that even high school and university alumni were often unemployed and unable to earn a

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living. The GON itself has acknowledged the need for a more diverse and job-oriented madrassa curriculum. Modernization of madrassa curricula is one of the priorities of the newly created Ministry of Religious Affairs (reftel D), and the GON is likely to approach donors and seek their support. NOTE: UNICEF has already launched a pilot program to stress hygiene and health education in some Nigerien madrassas. END NOTE With Niger's government and traditional clerical establishment ready to reform madrassa education, room exists for meaningful USG intervention.

COMMENT:...AND WHY WE SHOULD
GIVE IT TO THEM

¶11. (C) At the end of our session, Poloff asked Imam Mounirou Issoufou if he had any questions for us. He noted that Izalists had tried to win him over by offering him cars and materials, but he refused. He argued that the traditional brotherhoods can offer young people a more intellectually and spiritually compelling vision than the Izalists; one consonant with their African heritage. They cannot, however, match the Izalists' dollars and offers of material support. He then asked Poloff why the USG doesn't help moderates to fight against these extremist tendencies.

¶12. (C) The Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP)'s mission is to lessen support for extremist ideologies like Izala and to address some of the causes of youth alienation that contribute to their allure. TSCTP funded youth centers in Maradi and the Agadez region have had some notable successes in the realm of job training and economic integration for at-risk youth. (The local-hire Maradi youth center manager noted in a conversation with AIDoff that "if the United States didn't fund this '(youth center)' the Izalists would have.") Youth centers are also a way to meet madrassa students' and educators' needs, while bolstering Islamic moderates' position and answering the GON's anticipated call for donor support for religious education reform. As TSCTP grows, the youth center concept will expand to other Nigerien cities, and should focus on madrassa students and instructors. NOTE: The NGO CARE, which manages the Maradi youth center project, has drafted plans for an expanded program in both Maradi and Zinder, with a focus on madrassa students. CARE also has a one-year grant from Danish Cooperation (DANIDA) for a youth center type pilot activity in Zinder. Therefore, some relevant infrastructure and experience are already in place. END NOTE

¶13. (C) If TSCTP projects involve traditional clergy and chiefs, their madrassas and their parishioners -- not only as implementation partners and beneficiaries but as program designers, consultants and "public faces" -- they will help these moderates to match the allure of Izala. Projects that give moderate clergy and traditional chiefs a meaningful role in planning and execution at every stage will also contribute to local ownership, correctly identify local needs, and reinforce Sufi authorities' role in cities where Izala has won converts through largesse. This investment is also scaleable. Full-scale youth centers on the Maradi / Agadez model cost over \$1 million each. Micro-scholarships for madrassa students to attend Nigertec classes, or grants to local professional associations to underwrite their training of madrassa students are also options. No matter how employed, TSCTP madrassa projects that partner with traditional clergy and chiefs will enable us to meet Imam Issoufou's call for development "deliverables" akin to those Izala can offer by virtue of its Middle Eastern money. END COMMENT

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